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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RABAT 001392

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: MOROCCO ELECTIONS - FEELING ABANDONED BY RABAT,
RURAL MOROCCANS EXPRESS ANGER OR SELL THEIR VOTES

REF: A. RABAT 1274

- [1](#)B. RABAT 1248
- [1](#)C. RABAT 1155
- [1](#)D. RABAT 1340
- [1](#)E. RABAT 996

Classified By: By D/Polcouns Ian McCary. Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) During an Embassy visit to Khenifra and Mrirt in Morocco's Middle Atlas region we found a mix of apathy and anger among interlocutors. According to one candidate, and many residents, vote buying by parties is the norm in rural areas and slums. Most welcomed the idea of observers, but said the important electoral subversion occurred before voting, not as ballots are cast. None of our interlocutors expected government interference on election day. Stern messages from the King and Minister of Interior have had an effect on the bureaucracy, we heard.

[1](#)2. (C) Unlike residents in other parts of the country who seem simply worn out by political machinations (reftels), many Khenifrans expressed anger toward the parliament, the government, and "Morocco." Some felt insulted that the Government of Morocco (GOM) would "dare to ask them to participate, register and vote when people die in winter from lack of services." Due to pre-election pay-offs, however, they expected rural and slum turn-out to be relatively high. End Summary.

DEMOGRAPHIC TENSIONS

[1](#)3. (C) Mohammed Abdi, a freelance journalist and NGO director, told FSN and Poloff during an August 28 and 29 pre-election sounding visit to Khenifra and Mrirt that demographic change is a source of political tension in the region. Over the past twenty years, large numbers of rural residents moved out of the mountains and into Khenifra valley to look for work. They brought their tribal kin and power structures into the city and recreated them in segregated slums. Most of the newcomers are illiterate and unsophisticated and fall prey to political parties who buy their votes with money, feasts, and promises. Residents are

willing to sell their votes because they expect nothing from parliamentarians in the long run, and see bribes as a way to at least get something tangible out of the political process.

¶4. (C) Khenifra's educated and professional residents feel demographically outnumbered by slum dwellers, believe their voices are diluted or canceled by the mass of purchased votes, and stay away from the polls en masse. This leads to a deceptively high overall participation rate by underprivileged voters, which looks good in reports he commented, but actually represents an absence of real democracy.

¶5. (C) Urban immigration outstrips job growth and service provision, which has led to resentment. The Party of Justice and Development (PJD) is tapping into this vein in Khenifra through effective grass roots organization, attentive staff members, a targeted local platform, and an ability to deliver mosques quickly to neighborhoods. Unlike other parties' campaigns, they work with and through NGOs, women's groups and community associations, which helps extend their reach. Abdi said that although they have not been any more successful than other parties at delivering services or jobs, people trust them more. He added that the PJD has support because residents are looking for an Islamic solution and the PJD is the "least evil" of the choices. According to Abdi, extremist groups such as Hijra wa Takfir and Jemaat al Tabligh are active in the Khenifra region.

OBSERVERS AND THE "LOOK GOOD" ELECTIONS

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¶6. (C) Every person we spoke with supported the idea of international observers and wanted one in his or her polling station, but felt the important corruption occurred well before election day. Hassan Arbou, the Municipal Librarian, said that Khenifra "needed observers for the three months prior to elections. By election day, the decision is pre-ordained." Journalist Kamal Mountassir said that observers will prove their worth if the GOM integrates the suggestions from the 2007 monitors' post-election report into the next round of elections. Abdi welcomed the teams, but worried that a positive report would give international credibility to a "still broken system." An NGO representative in Mrirt said that the European Union (EU) had allowed the GOM to "buy off" domestic observers by funneling monies through the Moroccan Ministry of Finance instead of directly to observers. Even though it was EU money, he said, it made the local observers essentially government employees and not independent.

¶7. (C) More than one interlocutor said that they expect a number of ballots to be declared invalid due to being incorrectly filled out. In 2002, they said, the Istiqlal Party won by 500,000 votes, but approximately 1 million ballots were declared invalid. This was not attributed to corruption, but procedural ignorance and poor voter education (particularly among illiterate voters). However, it had the effect of canceling out a portion of the participating electorate. Some felt that the new ballots might be more confusing than the old card system and lead to similar problems on a greater scale, although the new ballots were also thought to be more tamper resistant.

SOME WAYS THE GAME IS PLAYED

¶8. (C) We heard from a variety of sources that electoral corruption and subversion begins with constituency boundaries. The Ministry of Interior reportedly drew Khenifra's district boundaries along tribal lines over twenty

years ago. Keeping tribal blocks intact allowed the government to bribe customary leaders who then delivered all the votes in their constituencies as directed. Modern-day parties still use the old system and bribe leaders in rural areas and slums to line up their peoples' votes "Chicago style." Mohammed Abdi described a campaign event in a rural village where a candidate said "I'm not going to give you a program, I'm going to give you money." Parties are no longer allowed to feed people for votes, but circumvent new rules by hosting lavish lunches during day-long official campaign events. A major local industrialist and candidate apparently pays bribes to people visiting his oil facility under the guise of business dealings.

¶9. (C) Opinions differed about whether parties should be allowed to transport voters to polls. The Provincial Campaign Director for the Popular Movement Union (UMP) said that transport prohibitions were fine in urban areas, but unrealistic in rural areas where voters had to travel long distances. He then launched into a long discourse about how many election rules are written for the urban context. Most civil society representatives said that voter transport was used to influence balloting. Kamal Mountassir wondered why people had no problem getting themselves to the administrative centers that also serve as polling stations for normal matters during the year, but suddenly needed to be driven to vote.

¶10. (C) Several individuals expressed curiosity and concern over the fact that a large number of rural residents received voter registration cards in the mail without ever having registered. The MOI's new system is designed to require a person to register and then physically and personally present identification before receiving a registration card (Rabat 1340). FSN, who is registered in a rural district, confirmed that he too received an unsolicited card. Interlocutors did not know if this was evidence of wrongdoing, but it raised their suspicions. They said that in the past, voter rolls were packed with names and, toward the close of election day, officials forged signatures of individuals who had not yet voted and cast ballots for them.

¶11. (C) Kamal Mountassir, however, said that he did not

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think officials would risk their careers for election day shenanigans. Despite fraud by political parties, he thought the GOM and MOI was remarkably neutral this year. "In 2002 they were passive and let anything happen. This year, they seem truly neutral and take action when they need to against violators." He said the King's speeches and a stern admonition from the Minister of Interior to provincial leaders around the country had a tangible effect on functionaries' behavior. For the first time, he said, even non civil servants engaging in corrupt acts are at least doing it with the fear of getting caught, not with impunity.

BLURRY CAMPAIGN LINES EASY TO CROSS

¶12. (C) Mountassir added that Moroccan election law needed better guidelines to delineate the roles of political professionals and party activists. He said it is unclear who can be paid for political activity and who cannot, leading to situations where it is unknown if money paid is remuneration or bribery. It has also created a class of professional supporters. We met one such worker taking a break from handing out pamphlets and being an enthusiastic crowd member at rallies. He was at great pains to say that he was "only paid, not a believer." He said that people at the local party office did not really understand the national platform and were simply focused on getting elected. He did not plan to vote.

¶13. (C) All of our interlocutors agreed that the campaign was more peaceful this year. As of August 29, there were no reports of clashes in Khenifra and Mrirt between opposing party activists, unlike in 2002. Nobody could say if this was due to growing political maturity or apathy. A couple of patrol officers said they expected problems over the weekend and in the four days prior to elections. Raucous campaign parades and convoys criss-crossed the city late into the night accompanied by honking horns and chanting, but did not seem to draw people who were not already participants. Party pamphleteers shoved their wares at disinterested passersby. We drove through many of the surrounding slums and saw poster bedecked election cars and campaign workers at every stop, but they did not draw large crowds. The PJD and Istiqlal offices/cafes on one of Khenifra's main streets were full of people, but many other parties' offices were shuttered. Mountassir noted that parties were branding themselves more this year through conspicuous use of their symbols in order to affix images in illiterate voters' minds.

A POX ON BOTH YOUR HOUSES

¶14. (C) Both Mountassir and Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS) candidate and Member of Parliament Abdellah Abassi said that voters bear some of the responsibility for the current situation. "If they stopped selling their votes, people would stop buying them." Others said that members of Parliament who visited their constituencies only to campaign created a climate of electoral ennui. All we met said that intensive, grass roots voter education (more than parliamentary training) was absolutely necessary if the electorate was to mature. Abassi added that USAID's Parliamentary Support Project was excellent, but would only be worthwhile in the long run if it was integrated into a regular and long-term parliamentary orientation program. "If you stop now, you will have wasted all your money."

"ELECTIONS AND POVERTY DO NOT MIX"

¶15. (C) In sometimes emotional and angry statements during a roundtable with civil society representatives in Mrirt, a small town 30 kilometers south of Khenifra, participants told poloff that people were too busy surviving to think about voting for a government that had forgotten them. Akbouch Anouri, head of the Mrirt section of the National Election Observatory said, "Elections and poverty don't mix. Democracy needs social, economic, political and cultural pillars to exist and we have none of them." Mohammed Afghou,

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a member of the International Amazight (Berber) Congress, said that he and most political Amazight were boycotting the elections. He also refused to speak modern standard Arabic as a protest against the "Arabization of Morocco." Another speaker said that the only reason there was not a civil war in the region yet was vestigial respect for the king. Khenifra's role in Morocco's independence struggle was recounted with pride, but people said they now had a sense of being spurned and abandoned by a distant and disinterested government.

CANDIDATES ARE NOT DISCUSSING DEAD VILLAGERS, BUT EVERYONE ELSE IS

¶16. (C) Last winter, 31 residents in the remote village of Anfougou died of cold. Interlocutors said that it was only international press attention that goaded the GOM into providing relief supplies. They added that the GOM did not respond effectively to similar incidents related to livestock deaths and human disease outbreaks over the past year that

did not receive press attention. Anouri said that when the Wali (governor) and other officials visited Anfou and the other villages to encourage electoral participation, residents threw stones at the party and turned in their voter and national identification cards, saying they would rejoin Morocco when it was ready to join them.

¶17. (C) Neither of the candidates and none of the party officials we met with mentioned the above issue, but almost everybody else did.

COMMENT

¶18. (C) Poloff's experience in Khenifra and Mrirt differed significantly from Econoff's August 2 pre-election sounding trip to another part of the Trans Atlas region, which found a much more optimistic populace (Rabat 1274). Although the general electoral trends in Khenifra and Mrirt mirror those in other parts of the nation, we were surprised at the depth of anger and disenchantment with the political process and the central government. Most of the party representatives we met seemed out of touch with constituents' concerns, although PPS candidate Abdellah Abassi was quite frank and open about most issues. Residents, especially in Mrirt, seemed to lash out at any symbol or source of power, whether domestic or international. As noted, however, the palpable resentment in the region will not necessarily preclude an "acceptable" turnout on election day. Septel will follow with a focus on the anger and anti-GOM and anti-USG sentiment encountered during the visit. End comment.

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